

What was a Greek Chorus?

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To us the word 'chorus' suggests song. But the essential notion of the Greek word *choros* was dance (as in 'choreography'), and the word is often used of the simple act of dancing. But it is also used to describe a group performance which combined words, music and dance, a form which throughout Greek history played an important role in civic celebration and which for almost three centuries (from the seventh to the fifth century B.C.) attracted some of the finest poetic talents in the history of Greek literature.

The civic importance of the chorus is attested most clearly by a passage in Sophocles' *King Oedipus* where the chorus, at a point in the play when their religious beliefs are under threat, question the value of worship in a world where evil goes unpunished. 'For if such evil practices are held in honour', they ask, 'why should I dance?' That is, 'why honour the gods?' The question had a particular force for Sophocles' audience, which as it heard the words was watching the chorus dance in the festival of Dionysus at which the play was performed. The automatic association of dance with worship comes as a surprise to anyone raised in the Western Christian tradition, in which dance has been confined to the realm of entertainment. But the association comes naturally to many non-Christian cultures; and as Sophocles' words show, it came naturally to the average Athenian.

And not just the Athenian, for sources widely separated in time and space testify to the role played by the chorus in Greek worship. For public worship the chorus was an ideal instrument. Multiple voices have a volume which the soloist lacks, and therefore both power in a large gathering and a grandeur worthy of the gods. Their number makes the chorus more fitting as a representative of the community, especially since the performers, whether girls, boys or men, were not professionals but members of the community. And the combination of voice, movement and accompaniment created an appealing spectacle for gods who possessed human tastes as well as human form.

Choral music was not however confined to cult. Though most choral forms were linked to religious occasions (the dithyramb, for instance, to the worship of Dionysus, the paean to the worship of Apollo), we also find choral types which were partly or predominantly secular, in particular the dirge, the *encomium* (originally 'party song' or 'drinking song' but from early on in practice a song of praise) and the victory ode. These songs were devoted to a human, living or dead, rather than a god. In such cases again the stateliness of choral delivery was clearly appropriate.

The chorus before drama

On the performance of Greek choral poetry our knowledge is woefully inadequate. Few traces survive of the music of any Greek choral song. Choreography is lost completely. So even in the case of poetic texts which survive in their entirety we have only a fragment of the total experience of the first audience. Probably the singing was in unison, by the whole chorus, and the dance, again by the whole chorus, kept pace and rhythm with the singing. Since Greek choral songs were generally longer than solo songs, this required both stamina and co-ordination. The result was a spectacle which appealed simultaneously to eye, ear and mind. The element of spectacle was increased by costume, for evidence from as far apart as seventh-century Sparta and fourth-century Athens indicate that at civic festivals the chorus was exquisitely dressed. Presumably this was true of all choral performances.

But though much has been lost, the surviving remains still give a clear indication of the vigour and versatility of the choral tradition, particularly since excavations in Egypt over the last hundred years have brought to light texts by authors who previously were known to us only by reputation. These fragments demonstrate the variety of styles and talents within the tradition and also the range of choral lyric, which overlapped in theme both with Greek epic and with the solo personal poetry of the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.

Our earliest surviving choral poet, Alcman, composed cult songs for choruses of Spartan girls in the seventh century. Not the least source of Alcman's appeal for the modern reader is the glimpse he gives of a Sparta unlike the grim society we know from later sources. His songs were composed for a local audience and are rich in proper names of no significance outside the community for which they were composed; unusually, individual members of the chorus are identified and praised. With considerable skill Alcman blends solemn myth and moralizing with gaiety, wit and sensuous charm. The last quality can be seen in the following fragment: 'She looks at me more meltingly than sleep and death; not wasted is her sweetness. Astymeloisa gives me no answer, but with the garland like a star falling through bright heaven or golden sapling or soft feather she passed through [. . .] on slender feet'.

A generation later Stesichorus of Himera in Sicily was composing narrative poems rich in Homeric themes and expressions, for choral delivery apparently. We know nothing about the occasions at which these works were performed. Stesichorus' poems were of almost epic proportions, in some cases perhaps two thousand lines; so long, in fact, that some modern scholars doubt they can have been performed by a chorus.

The Greek choral lyric reaches its peak early in the fifth century, with the work of two poets from the island of Ceos, Simonides and Bacchylides, uncle and nephew, and the Theban poet Pindar. All three were professionals, composing for hire for noblemen and princes throughout the Greek world. All three practised a variety of choral forms, sacred and

secular. Simonides was much admired in particular for his haunting laments. It is at this period that the choral victory ode, celebrating successes in the national athletic festivals, comes into being. Almost all of Pindar's victory odes, and a number of Bacchylides', survive. As an art-form the victory ode sounds unpromising, but at its best it is both beautiful and profound. The odes are much concerned with man's relationship with god and man's place in the world. Praise of the victor is combined with mythic narrative and moralizing. With these poets the international choral lyric reaches its peak and its finale. Choral songs were still commonly sung solo at banquets in the latter half of the fifth century. And choral cult songs by the great masters could always be revived. But musical tastes had moved away from the form and style of traditional choral lyric. Choral poetry no longer attracted the finest poets, and by the fourth century the range of choral songs still being composed had dwindled.

Tragic versatility

It was in Athens in the latter half of the sixth century B.C. that the most significant and most lasting innovation in choral poetry occurred, when the leader of the chorus which sang the dithyramb in honour of Dionysus stepped forward to converse with the rest of the chorus, and Greek tragedy was born. This development is associated with the name of Thespis. By the middle of the fifth century a second and third actor had been added. This expansion of the actors' role is matched by a progressive decline in the importance of the chorus, as we can see from a comparison of the number of choral verses in the surviving tragedies and (less easily measured) the degree of involvement of the chorus in the action of the play.

This development is not entirely consistent, since we find tragedians experimenting on occasion with more archaic techniques and forms. Thus in Aeschylus' *Suppliants* the chorus is one of the central characters; not unnaturally this led to a general conviction that we had here the oldest surviving tragedy, dating from a period when the chorus was still dominant, until the appearance of an embarrassing papyrus which indicated that *Suppliants* was produced late in Aeschylus' career, probably only five years before his masterpiece, the *Oresteia* trilogy. Again, Euripides' *Bacchae*, written at the end of his life and produced in the closing years of the fifth century, has a chorus which is relatively involved in the plot. Nevertheless, the chorus' decline continued throughout the century, until by the beginning of the fourth century tragedies were being produced in which the choral odes were not composed specifically for the play in which they figured. These songs were merely intervals between acts.

This is not true of any surviving tragedy, however. In all the plays which have come down to us the chorus has a role to play. The dramatists use the chorus in a variety of ways to deepen audience perception of events in the play. One major contribution (inherited from the dithyramb) is narrative. The chorus is often used (as in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and

Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*) to narrate events prior to the action of the play. Tragedy regularly deals with a limited sequence of events and a short space of time; the chorus can be used to place these events in a broader context. In the same way, by introducing general issues the chorus can present a religious or philosophical background against which to consider the specific events of the play. Since the chorus as a group can effectively present public opinion, and since Greek choruses regularly express 'moderate' opinion, the chorus may also help to shape audience response or moral judgement on actions and characters. Often the chorus' reaction to events is a guide to the audience.

Yet the chorus cannot simply be labelled an 'ideal spectator', for it is a character in the play; of necessity therefore its perspective is limited. Sometimes the emotional response or moral judgement of the chorus is mistaken (Sophocles in particular likes to have a choral ode of rejoicing immediately before a catastrophe), and the audience with its greater knowledge must distance itself from the chorus. The choral odes also mark the passage of time between scenes to allow for events offstage. At a more basic level (but still important, since Greek tragedy was performed by just three speaking actors) they offer an opportunity for actors to change costumes between scenes. And of course, as with other choral performances, the chorus increases the element of spectacle.

The tragic chorus needed stamina and versatility. At the festival each tragedian offered three tragedies and a satyr play (a play with a mythic theme like tragedy but humorous in tone, with a chorus of satyrs, anarchic and lecherous spirits of the wild). The choral parts in the tragedies might differ in age or sex; but the same male chorus performed all four plays, tragic and satyric, one after another.

The ineradicable chorus

With the chorus in Athenian comedy the element of spectacle was even more marked, for the choral costumes could be exotic, as in Aristophanes' *Birds*, in which the chorus was dressed as a variety of birds, and *Wasps*, in which the chorus of aged jurors wear wasp costumes which express their fierce temper. The comic chorus generally has a narrower role than the tragic chorus. Aristophanic drama centres on conflict, and his chorus tends to side far more emphatically with or against one character than is usually the case with the tragic chorus. The comic chorus does not expound principles as the tragic chorus does, nor (since the comic plot is invented, unlike the tragic plot which draws on existing myth) does it provide a narrative which links present and past. The chorus does however help to direct audience reaction in a way similar to the tragic chorus. The tonal range of the comic chorus is greater than that of the tragic chorus. Its songs vary from the indecent through the lyrically beautiful to the reverent.

As with tragedy, the comic chorus declined in importance. For Menander in the late fourth century B.C. the choral odes have become mere interludes, unconnected with the play. But the final step, the abolition of the chorus, was impossible. The chorus was central to the festival. A playwright wishing to perform at an Athenian festival was said to 'ask for a chorus', and if his work was approved for performance he was 'given a chorus'. Religious conservatism and literary sense of tradition together ensured that Athenian drama never quite lost touch with its origins in the cult dance.

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